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Complexity and the performance of social interventions

It is now routine to say that there are a wide range of organisations which undertake activity to enact social policy objectives. The range of organisations involved in enacting social policy are one demonstration that previously clear boundaries between state and civil society are now more problematic to draw with any clarity.

In the field of the Performance Management of public services, this blurring of the boundaries between state and civil society has been recognised in the shift from speaking about Performance Management (PM) to Performance Governance (PG). It is now recognised that social interventions often involve multiple stakeholders, including both citizens themselves, and a range of private and voluntary sector organisations. (Halligan, Sarrico and Rhodes 2012; Conaty 2012) As a result, new concepts of PG, and in particular shared accountability, have developed. This is also reflected in the 'Collective Impact' movement (FSG 2015).

The effect of introducing governance is to expand the realm of “managing for performance” that both opens up the black box and goes well beyond. It suggests greater complexity and less direct control by governments...Several strands of performance governance can be differentiated. First there are organisational relationships both within and beyond the public sector that cover a range of collaborations through networks, partnerships, and coordination mechanisms that are governed by performance mechanisms. Public sector organisations linking to and partnering with private, not-for-profit, non-governmental and ad hoc citizen groups are all part of governing. The second dimension covers participation and citizen engagement in performance feedback. (Halligan, Sarrico and Rhodes 2012: 226/7)

The move to PG is helpful in understanding the greater complexity that is now a feature of social interventions, and the entwined nature of public, private and third sector activity in this area. However, there is more work to do in this area in order to properly conceptualise this new complex landscape.

Surprisingly, given PG's recognition of “greater complexity and less direct control”, the initial formulations of it have not made use of complexity approaches to social science (Byrne and Callaghan 2014). Even though the PG approach recognises that social interventions are 'complex', thinkers in this area do not appear to be making use of complexity approaches – neither the epistemology of complexity, or investigations of complex systems themselves.

We can see this lack of engagement with complexity manifest in PG's adoption of key aspects of the core of a New Public Management approach to the PM of social interventions. Rather than adopting a complexity perspective, which holds that it is impossible to attribute outcomes of complex systems to organisations or combinations of organisations (Lowe and Wilson 2016), PG thinkers seek to make multiple organisations accountable for producing desired outcomes (Halligan, Sarrico and Rhodes 2012; Conaty 2012; FSG 2015). As a consequence of this lack of engagement with complexity, rather than providing clarity regarding how to manage the performance of “shared outcomes” within complex systems, the nature of such outcomes appears to be “uncontrollable and unmanageable” (Conaty 2012: 304)

In order to adequately conceptualise the entwined nature of state and civil society, this paper will suggest that we need to adopt a complexity-friendly perspective. Such a perspective can be seen in Mowles (2014)'s assertion that social interventions are “complex systems thrust amid complex systems” (Mowles 2014: 168)

One of the most important perspectives that complexity approaches offer is that desired social outcomes (such as reduced re-offending, better mental health, increased employment etc) are emergent properties of complex systems (Lowe and Wilson 2015). This means that the nature of the problems with which both state and civil society are concerned are complex, because they exist within complex systems of which both state and civil society are part, but which are beyond the control of either.

The recognition of complexity is therefore a recognition of interdependence between state and civil society (Children England 2014). This recognition has significant implications for how we think about the nature of accountability in public management. It does this in two ways:

Firstly, it strongly suggests that we cannot hold people or organisations accountable for producing particular outcomes. We know that such outcomes are beyond people's control. So what does accountability mean in complex environments? It means holding people accountable for the quality of their practice – of their ability to make judgements in situations of uncertainty. In this context, accountability means seeking an account of the reasons which underpinned a particular judgement (Gibbon 2013) or the deployment of a particular practice. We can hold people accountable for exercising judgement well, not for what happens as a result of that judgement.

If complexity challenges the content of accountability, it also challenges the form which accountability takes. Holding people accountable for results fits well with vertical forms of accountability. Those in positions of hierarchical power, and the subordinates they are holding accountable, agree on metrics and measurement methods, and then use the outputs of that measurement for accountability purposes. Those making accountability judgements are not required to be familiar with the detail of the situation – the measures supply all that is needed.

Complexity-approaches seem to call for a different form of accountability. If we are to hold people accountable for exercising good-judgement, we need to be familiar with the context of that judgement, and have a detailed account of the way that judgement was exercised. This suggests that we should think about horizontal accountability (O'Donnell 1998) in addition to more traditional forms of vertical accountability. This fits with the epistemology of complexity, which says that in order to make good decisions and judgements about how to act within a complex system, one must understand the detail of that situation:

We cannot understand the dynamic nature of complex situations without paying attention to all these various forms of variety. The particular pathways that can and may occur depend on the detail of what happens. (Boulton et al 2015: 39)

Conclusion

We have argued that the blurred boundaries between state and civil society can be conceptualised by understanding desired social outcomes as emergent properties of complex systems. A complexity approach requires us to think differently about accountability in public management. It means letting go of the idea that we can control the production of outcomes. We cannot hold people or organisations accountable for outcomes, and attempting to do so undermines effective practice in complex systems (For example, the results of seeking to commission for outcomes are problematic in exactly the ways in which this conceptualising predicts (Tomkinson 2016)).

Instead, we should focus on how people can make better decisions in situations of complexity - because that is the reality of social action.

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